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Keeping Hold of the Jewel: Buddhist Youth Activism and Multidirectional Migration in Mountain Java

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Abstract The paper investigates the emergence of a youth organisation in rural Central Java and its relevance for the channelling of Buddhist revivalist stances in the Temanggung area. Rather than instantiating a linear "return", the Buddhist revitalisation efforts promoted by the group materialise a novel religious scenario marked by a sharper influence of Theravāda Buddhism and a mélange of ethnocultural stances. More specifically, the paper intends to show how the formation of the youth organisation and the on-the-ground activities implemented reflect wider dynamics of internal mobility as well as new economic/entrepreneurial sensibilities.

Keywords Youth movements. Indonesia. Living Buddhism. Entrepreneurialism.

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1 Introduction: A Buddhist Activist in Muslim Java

Nested on the highlands of the Sumbing-Sindoro volcanic range, in Central Java, Surjosari[1] is part of a scattered group of villages in the Temanggung region that include a substantial Buddhist population. To most visitors, local and non-local, this constitutes arguably a significant curiosity for a regency (and an island) which, albeit religiously diverse, has been long marked by Islam as its majoritarian orientation. Within Temanggung's demographics, the village of Surjosari stands out as the only one in which Buddhism figures as the overwhelming majority affiliation among its 140 households. However, when I visited the village for the first time, in early 2017, little suggested that the village could be carved out unmistakeably from the general pool of rural settlements in the Temanggung highlands. On the contrary, Surjosari appeared unassuming even in comparison to the other villages that stretch on the area's slopes when driving up from Semarang, the provincial capital on the north coast of Java. With one family-run shop and the village's margins dissolving into the vast plantations to the south and gradually blurring into a large forest to the north, Surjosari might give the impression of an aloof 'remote area' (Saxer 2016; Ardener 2012).

The scene was likely not so dissimilar from what Subagyo witnessed upon moving to the village three years before my first visit. Subagyo was a man in his early thirties and his biography mirrored, and sometimes channelled, the changes that were underway just below the surface through the period of my stays in Central Java, up to 2020. He was originally from a small port town on the north coast of the island, a much more vibrant province for its home furniture industry and resorts. Subagyo moved to the village upon marrying Metta, a girl from the Temanggung regency. They moved to Surjosari together with her father, who was originally born and raised in the village. The choice to move to a relatively secluded place was thoroughly meditated and not solely dictated by Metta's background.

Subagyo was not himself a farmer and had lived for most of his young adult life in places that had little to share with Surjosari's highland remoteness. On the contrary, he seemed exemplary of the contemporary educated, tech-savvy and highly mobile young urbanite. He graduated from high school in a private Protestant institution under the umbrella of a Christian foundation (*Yayasan Pendidikan Kristen*). Right after, Subagyo moved on to Jakarta where he studied an undergraduate program at STAB Nalanda, the most prominent institution in Indonesia for higher education in the field of Buddhist

1 The names of the smallest administrative units (villages/hamlets) and the names of the participants other than monks have been anonymised.

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studies and a religious milieu close to transnational Theravādin networks. Subagyo met his future wife, Metta, who was also enrolled at a Buddhist college in the town of Salatiga, at an event in Temanggung organised by STAB Nalanda in collaboration with smaller Buddhist organisations from Yogyakarta and Temanggung-city. After a stint in the cultural and educational hotspot of Yogyakarta, they relocated to the steep slopes of Surjosari in 2014, in a house belonging to Metta's father. Not long afterwards, Metta gave birth to a daughter, Aykia.

Subagyo was very mindful of his daughter's upbringing. He taught Aykia traditional Javanese children's games and photographed her multiple times every day against the background of the fields, the forest or by the village's *vihara*,[2] pictures which he later posted profusely on his social media. He intended to convey to his social media contacts the bucolic beauty of countryside living, as stated more or less overtly in his captions, referencing a presumably more authentic way of life. Simultaneously, Subagyo himself donned more and more frequently traditional Javanese attire in his day-to-day conduct. Upon my second visit in 2019, he wore a *sarong* and a *blangkon* (traditional lower garment and headwear respectively) in place of his older blue jeans.

He had also set up an extensive home library on Javanese arts, literature and mysticism, next to a number of books on Buddhist subjects from a variety of schools. Subagyo seemed very proud of the collection, although he admitted having "barely time to read any". Together with his library, icons in his house also began to expand. Where there used to hang only an Indian-stylised Buddhist poster, by the time of my last departure walls and shelves around the house accumulated various Buddhist imageries, from statuettes to framed pictures. Quickly, Subagyo and his house became a point of reference for Surjosari's communal life, his library the venue for public discussions and gatherings.

The lifepath of Subagyo is telling of the processes that were condensing in Surjosari and that reflected pervasive dynamics in contemporary Java. As many have observed after the fall of the New Order in 1998 (Aspinall 2011), one of the consequences of the massive decentralisation policies put in place in the post-Suharto era has been the revival or the re-invention of local ethnic identities in several parts of Indonesia. Perhaps surprisingly due to the status of the Javanese as a decades-long hegemonic ethnic group on all levels of national life, the (re)emergence of the concept of 'Javaneseness'

2 In modern Indonesia, *vihara* identifies a functioning Buddhist temple. Although it is legally distinguished from a *klenteng*, a Chinese-syncretic house of worship, in popular parlance they are often used interchangeably. This reflects the decades-long ban on Sinic cultural features, lifted in 2006, during which Chinese worship venues needed to be reinvented through categories perceived to be more unequivocally Buddhist.

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as an ethnofolk marker was no exception in this process. Javanese language has experienced a renaissance up to institutional quarters in Java (Rodemeier 2014) as well as seeping into mass media via specific representational forms (Bogaerts 2017). Programs on Javanese traditional music, weaving and medicine have multiplied in recent years across the island (Weydmann 2020; Rizzo 2020), while the highest Islamic council has recently issued a thorough restyling of the halal certification logo[3] with the lettering in Arabic fashioned by way of a *gunungan*, a symbol of the traditional shadow theatre. In 2022, the choice of the central government to name Indonesia's capital-to-be 'Nusantara', a mediaeval Java-centric connotation for the archipelago and used in post-colonial times as an indigenous surrogate for 'Indonesia', might be considered as falling within the same scope.

Such processes have important counterparts elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago (van der Muur et al. 2019). In the Javanese case, however, they signal a re-localisation and revalorisation of cultural fragments, from language to artistic conventions and architectonic styles, that in Indonesia's post-colonial history had shifted symbolically to a cultural scaffolding understood as a generic and semi-uprooted referent for Indonesian culture at large, through a process that some have characterised as the 'Javanisation' of Indonesia (Mulder 2005; Mayari 2023).

As is clear from Subagyo's life trajectory, Buddhism entertains a complex relationship with narratives on Javanese history and ethnic authenticity. While a thoroughly new religion in its present configuration (Yulianti 2024) and bound to the recent history of Indonesians of Chinese descent (Chia 2020), practitioners and observers alike have perceived and represented Buddhism as a linear 'return' of the religious culture of classical, pre-Islamic Java. The revivalist discourse that binds contemporary Buddhism with classical Java returns an alternative history of Javanese ethnocultural authenticity with respect to parallel claims posited by Islamic scholars between Javaneseness and traditionalist Islam.[4]

In the remainder of this contribution, I will outline, through fieldwork-based ethnographic data, how the activities of Subagyo and the youth association he established in the Temanggung countryside,

3 See for instance: https://food.chemlinked.com/news/food-news/indonesia-unveils-new-halal-label-logo#:~:text=Indonesia's%20new%20halal%20label%20logo,logo%20can%20still%20be%20circulated.

4 Through a series of controversial publications, in 2012 the local Islamic academic Fahmi Basya had popularised a number of theories which postulated that also the eighth century Borobudur Buddhist heritage site, in Central Java, was in fact the evidence of Islamic numerology and symbolism in disguise. The monument should have been regarded, as such, as a Javanese-Islamic heritage site.

Pemuda Buddhis, conveyed a distinct mélange of Theravāda Buddhism and Javanese identitarian stances. Simultaneously, the activism of the group demonstrates that attempts at revitalising the cultural and religious life of the Buddhist communities of Temanggung cannot be severed from practices aimed at breathing new life into the economy and sociality of the villages. This emerged with clarity in the efforts of the association aimed at implementing a modern coffee enterprise and preparing the grounds for the development of an eco-tourist industry. The religious and non-religious stances involved in the activism of the group also reflect new mobility patterns in Java, which no longer posit the countryside as the default departure point of migratory trails.

I do so through fieldwork-based ethnographic data and pre- and post-fieldwork communication, observations and online ethnography. The study is tightly related to a broader research project on contemporary Buddhist revivalism in Indonesia, to which I have dedicated three on-site fieldwork stints between 2015 and 2020. The practical involvement of research participants followed the chain of acquaintances that braided into my previous study on Javanese traditional music education. Subagyo and Sura in particular, the main research participants who figure in this article, have also acted as invaluable access points to an otherwise relatively remote field in the Temanggung highland region.

2 Nation and Devotion: A Note on Youth Activism in Post-colonial Java

Youth activism has a vigorous history in the chronicles of modern Indonesia and, at multiple junctions, it has been the vector through which major political and societal stances have been formulated. The mobilisation of the *pemuda* noun carries itself a specific semiotic history, as it rests on a semantic tension with another linguistic referent for youth, *remaja*. A substantivisation of the Melayu *muda* ('unripe'), the category of *pemuda* began to be documented as a localised rendering of the Euro-american notion of 'youth' in the later stage of the colonial period. However, its usage remained confined to the identification of bureaucratic ranks, and its circulation in everyday speech was only scantly documented thereafter (Lee 2016).

Naafs and White (2012) showed how, with the acceleration of consumer culture under the Suharto regime, a new term was popularised for identifying the emergence of 'youth' as a brand-new category. A term which would be double-bound to the diffusion of a commodity-driven global economy, one that was both agentive and objective in a novel and presumably transparent age division of market participation. The noun *remaja* fit that purpose and left, arguably, *pemuda*

to the earnest domain of the political and military connotations in which it first appeared.

Through the Twentieth century, indeed, *pemuda* organisations saturated the militant realm, spanning the political spectrum from nationalist groups to far-left activism (see Peters 2013 for *Pemuda Rakyat*; Foulcher 2000 for *Sumpah Pemuda*; Ryter 1998 for *Pemuda Pancasila*). To this day, several political parties retain militant youth wings that operate very closely to the party's main leadership. The employment of *pemuda* in the associationist sphere, that is, cannot but convey a reference to its peculiar semiotic life also when its current domain may extend, on the surface, beyond the overtly political. Although most of the well-known youth nationalist movements were formulated on a secular platform, religion was never far from sight, as it wasn't from the conceptualisation of the Indonesian nation-state itself. Membership of prominent movements such as *Sumpah Pemuda*, navigated by the founders of the nation Soekarno and Muhammad Hatta, overlapped almost entirely with that of youth movements of a spiritualist kind, like *Pemuda Theosofi*, a spin-off of the globalist lodge.[5] From the same youth branch of the Theosophical lodge, in 1934 the first Buddhist association in contemporary Indonesia emerged as Batavian Buddhist Association (Yulianti 2024).

In the context of post-New Order Indonesia, with the restoration of democratic freedoms, including religious expression in civic life, the strengthened prominence of religion in the public sphere has been oftentimes filtered and driven through youth activism as well. This is most visible within Islamic domains, as youth and student groups have articulated movements and counter-movements on issues ranging from religious orthodoxy to feminism.[6] Within Indonesia's Buddhist affairs, the surge of Theravāda Buddhism from the 1990s was marked, among the launching of various organisations, by the formation of the youth organisation PATRIA, an acronym for *Pemuda Theravāda Indonesia*, whose name reflected the complex ties between Buddhism and the nationalist ethos despite the religion's minoritarian status.

Articulating a form of sociality and activism through the category of youth such as *Pemuda Buddhis* is significant for the web of meanings, associations and imaginaries with which the *pemuda* referent is charged. The mobilisation of the distinct category is not only relevant for drawing in specific nationalistic and patriotic connections, but it helps to instil an important motivational stimulus and an idea of social advancement. Above all, it triggers a sense of collective

5 The Theosophy lodge was particularly active in Indonesia and it influenced closely the local revivals of the dharmic religions, particularly in Java (de Tollenaere 2004).

6 Ardhianto 2018; Feillard , van Doorn-Harder 2013; Nisa 2012; Rosyad 2007.

experience and effervescence which, as we'll see, is a facet of the local activism as crucial as the overt religionising mission in the Temanggung villages.

3 Temanggung: Marginality and Centrality on the Javanese Highlands

The revivalist stance at the heart of the *Pemuda Buddhis* movement is formulated in a context that expresses processes of marginalisation on many levels. A minority religious affiliation on a national scale,[7] Buddhism has entered complex power structures in the few rural settings in Java in which it found fertile ground in the proselytising missions of the 1950s and 1960s.[8] The lack of larger-scale networking and a solid infrastructure in terms of worship venues and religious specialists had produced an *umat*[9] that, according to many of my interlocutors, remained largely indifferent towards formal Buddhist learning and practice. Moreover, the crystallisation of Islam as a powerful tool in identity politics and an increasingly hegemonic force in the public sphere issued several episodes of outward or tacit tension among different groups, as well as policies of surcharged land taxations for non-Muslims. Over the years, episodes of 'economic conversion' into Islam were recounted as due to such policies, as well as occurring for the ambiguous status of inter-religious marriages. In order to avoid bureaucratic hassle and petty talk, many 'mixed' couples tend to wed into the same formal religion, with one of the partners formally converting into the religion of the spouse.

The sense of neglect and precarity sweeping the Buddhist community of the highlands is formulated against this backdrop. Enhancing the feeling of uncertainty for minority communities, the Temanggung area was also affected by multiple episodes of inter-religious

7 According to the 2010 census, Buddhists accounted for just under 1% of the population, approximately 1,7 million residents. A new census was underway at the time of writing.

8 The modern Buddhist missionary activity in Indonesia is due predominantly to the Buddhayana project of the charismatic Indonesian monk Ashin Jinarakkhita. The movement tried to promote an ecumenic understanding of Buddhism, while remaining sensitive to the local traditional religions. He also worked for the recuperation of the Borobudur heritage sites in a religious sense (see Chia 2018). After the foundation of *Sangha Theravada Indonesia* in 1976, Theravāda Buddhism began to diffuse progressively as the de facto orientation of many Indonesian Buddhists. This was facilitated through a tight internal organizational web and important institutional relations with the Thai Thammayut order, which began to send monastic missions (and organized royal visits) to Indonesia from the 1970s onwards. In 2019, a comprehensive Thai temple (Hemadhiro Mettawati Vihara) was established in West Jakarta.

9 Islamic-derived referent for 'religious community', routinely used in Indonesia also by Buddhists and Christians.

friction. In 2011 Muslim-Christian clashes issued after the publication of controversial statements by the local Pastor Antonius Bawengan.[10] Between 2009 and 2018, the regency was raided several times by the anti-terrorist unit Densus88 for acts of violence or terror planification linked to the Jemaah Islamiyah group (Osman 2010). The Temanggung cell was charged not only for the attacks on the local police headquarters, but also for its links to the Bali bombings of 2002 and to the Surabaya churches attacks in 2018.

In addition to the religious concerns of the community, the Temanggung regency is marked by a further set of events that situate it at the same time at the margins and at the centre of broader processes. The traditional crop of the region – tobacco – is the main form of sustenance for the majority of the farmers. Over the last few years, work at the plantations had experienced the joint effects of the shrinking agricultural population to the benefit of urbanisation and of the stagnant revenues that the giants of the domestic tobacco industry remitted to the unions. A chain of highly televised protests between 2012 and 2015 mobilised many residents against the tobacco corporations in order to renegotiate the selling rates (see Sobary 2016).

The sense of precarity more or less explicit in the formulation of revitalisation projects in movements such as *Pemuda Buddhis* reflects also this set of dynamics, which pertain to the religious field as much as to non-religious domains. Dynamics that are not necessarily exclusive to the Buddhist community, that is, but that reveal specific fractures when intersected with a minority condition in a heated sphere such as the public expression of religion in contemporary Indonesia. The movement initiated by Subagyo was conceived as a counterweight against these trends. At the same time, it displayed features and practices that echoed wider developments at the heart of Indonesian Buddhism as well as in contemporary Javanese social and economic patterns.

4 The Formation of a 'Javanese Buddhist' Militancy

Shortly after he moved to Surjosari on a permanent basis, Subagyo began organising evening gatherings at his veranda, meetings that were still consistently being carried on weekly throughout my stay in Temanggung. The subject of the state of the Buddhist demography was a frequent topic of conversation, either on the occasion of the rumour about someone's conversion out of Buddhism or when

10 Human Rights Watch (in Indonesian): https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/28/indonesia-religious-minorities-targets-rising-violence. Parts of the episode were also reported on international media, see NYT: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/world/asia/09indonesia.html.

discussing general news. In the narratives generated upon such informal gatherings, the reasons for the perceived demographic contraction were to be traced on the one hand to the expansion of Christian and Islamic educational institutions, a subject with which Subagyo was personally well acquainted. On the other hand, the quantitative decline and disengagement of the Buddhist community was also attributed to inter-religious marriage, a frequent topic of legal controversy and a perpetual item of gossip, in which case it was frequently the Buddhist counterpart to change his or her affiliation.

The particular concern with young people was also relatable to these motives, especially in the conversations taking place among 'senior' activists. On the side of navigating the internal mobility patterns, the youth was also naturally the population segment closest to educational policies and romantic flirts. Occasionally, Subagyo expressed this with an autobiographical note. Not only could he be considered an urbanised or highly mobile young adult, but he himself grew up in a Christian school and was on the verge of abandoning 'the way of the forefathers', which is the phrase by which, interchangeably, both the Javanist tradition and contemporary Buddhism as are often talked about.

However, Subagyo embodied also a different, less elicited trend, that is the multi-directionality of young people's mobility, a trend for which urbanisation is no longer the univocal movement intrinsic in internal mobility, as it has been the case for the past few decades (Batubara et al. 2022). Invested with a set of symbolic revalorisations and economic possibilities, the countryside is increasingly the terminus of mobility routes as well. If for Subagyo the value of rurality rested in its quality as the repository of authentic ethnoculture, for other activists it was the pool of unharnessed business opportunities. However, the two motivations were not necessarily mutually exclusive. They were not at least for Sura, one of the group's most engaged activists.

Sura was a couple of years younger than Subagyo and was born and raised in Tare, a hamlet a few kilometres north of Surjosari from a family of tobacco farmers. He was educated consistently as a Buddhist throughout his life, although he experienced an intensification of his religious commitment once he moved out of the countryside to study Economics at an undergraduate course in Semarang, the provincial capital. In the last year of his studies, he took the decision to move back to the village and returned to the city thereafter only in order to defend his B.A. thesis or for short-term jobs. Sura got in touch with Subagyo via social media first, and, after he moved back to the countryside, he began to be involved in the activities of *Pemuda Buddhis*, of which he quickly became one of the senior and most militant members.

Sura's decision to return to the village was animated by the joint desire of establishing a business in the countryside linked to coffee farming and participating in religious activism. In 2018, he became

a *samanera*, the title for a monastic novice, often taken on temporarily. He also admitted he occasionally toured the highlands of Temanggung in order to identify possible sites of heritage linked to Buddhism that were still overlooked by the local administrations and communities. After he joined *Pemuda Buddhis*, the 'heritage hunt' became a group activity that involved some of the activists. They successfully managed to bring a few fragments of artifacts to the attention of regional heritage committees, although the activity as such was extremely difficult to carry out because of the several complications involved, from surveying the opinions of archaeologists to the paperwork needed to file the case to the regional boards.

In May 2016 *Pemuda Buddhis* was formally launched with an event participated by over 200 young Buddhists from the hamlets of Temanggung and the nearby regencies of Kendal and Semarang. The relatively vast attendance was the result of months of careful intra-regional networking on the side of Subagyo and Sura and a big role was played by the prior casual get-togethers that had oftentimes Subagyo's veranda as the main point of reference. They also understood the importance of combining concrete networks of acquaintances with online reach-outs. Subagyo was especially keen on communicating through Facebook groups (and, progressively, through the then-nascent Instagram), capitalising on the popularity of public and private groups on traditional Javanese culture and religion. While the main audience of such local and island-wide groups is generally on the adult side, it speaks to a base that is highly militant on all sorts of Javanese-related cultural issues and posts in these groups tend to have a broad and quick resonance. At least a dozen of the young participants joined the ceremony from Temanggung-city and from the Semarang region after learning about the event through online groups, either personally or through a family member.

As the pathways into the organisation suggest, *Pemuda Buddhis* emerged implicitly as a Javanese affair from the point of view of ethnic identification. However, in the years after its creation, with information about its initiatives spreading by word of mouth or through social media cross-posting, events began to be also attended by participants of Chinese-Indonesian or Balinese backgrounds and other formal youth groups from urban areas. On events taking place in 'core' areas such as Surjosari, the distinction remained visible in interactions and teamwork in the course of the initiatives. Such distinction between strictly members and non-members, Javanese or otherwise, was increasingly blurred as events took place in other areas. This was also facilitated by the fact that further membership remained a predominantly informal and fluid business.

Unlike other experiments under the historical *pemuda* rubric, which tend to be overwhelmingly male-marked, moreover, *Pemuda Buddhis* was characterised from the start by a relative balance in gendered

participation. This mirrored closely the gender configuration of Buddhist youth groups in cities, which tend to have an even make-up gender-wise, with sometimes female members exceeding male participation.

The launching event of *Pemuda Buddhis* was overseen by Ven. Atthapiyo, a charismatic Theravāda monk from the island of Flores. Atthapiyo gave an introductory speech by Surjosari's vihara in which he recollected his path to monkhood in his early twenties. Born in Catholic-majority Flores, which granted him the title of 'first monk from Flores', and from a religiously committed family he only began to learn about Buddhism at the age of twenty-two. In his speech, he recounted the struggle of being a young Buddhist in an area without a pre-existing *umat*, particularly among his peers, and of how the presence of a supporting association would have facilitated his personal and religious life. He realised then the meaning of the Buddha's maxim on the dharma being like a jewel and not a random brick: for, like a jewel, it was indeed a rare thing to find among the living. The speech of Atthapiyo was clearly a motivational input to the formation of the youth group and he concluded his talk wishing that the spirit of *Pemuda Buddhis* "could warm up the chilly highlands of Temanggung".

The remainder of the launching event was an oath for the cause of *Pemuda Buddhis* and the commitment to the revitalisation of Buddhism. After the recitation of the Pāli[11] chant *Devata Aradhana* (the 'summoning of the divine beings') some of the participants came to the front of the vihara in turns and recited a personal commitment they had written on paper. The vows were then individually closed in envelopes and placed in a basket. The commitments would be sent three months later to the address of the respective vihara that the 'activist' had written on the envelope. For Subagyo, this was meant to engage symbolically the youngsters with their own communities and further motivate them to the cause. He showed me one of such letters, belonging to seventeen-year-old Nirmala:

> I, Nirmala, in front of the altar of Buddha Sakyamuni, commit myself to keep hold of the jewel that I have received. And I promise to continue the struggle of those who have preceded me in the advancement of Buddhism.

At the time of our conversations, Nirmala was still active in the activities of *Pemuda Buddhis*, stated Subagyo, and she intended to enrol in a program for Buddhist Studies, although she had so far postponed the application. The evening culminated with the launch of white lanterns into the sky.

11 The sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism.

4.1 Community (Re)making Through Temple 'Safaris'

The main raison d'être of *Pemuda Buddhis* was the overt religio-communitarian mission, as it was clear from its name and the ceremony that marked its creation. The Javanese-Buddhist project of the association came out squarely from one of the earliest initiatives of the group, a series of didactic-socialising excursions that went under the name of *safari vihara*. As a particularly knowledgeable resident of the area, Sura acted very often as the chief guide in such activities. Usually held on Sundays, such excursions managed to gather a varying number of young participants from the wider area, ranging from as few as seven people to several dozen attendants and followers.

While the central objective of these 'safaris' was the socialisation of Buddhist youngsters, the initiatives encompassed a larger mission. One of the typical manifestations of such safaris, the touring of active or dismissed Buddhist temples in the region, served as a moment of reflection and acquaintance with the local Buddhist communities, young and old, or simply for a chat with the village chief (*kepala desa*). Within the revivalist vision of Sura and Subagyo, these occasions were useful for mapping the regency's Buddhist presence, including the state of the temples – many were in fact in a state of prolonged decay or had been closed permanently. These safaris related to the underlying conviction for which, through various communal initiatives, the rural Buddhist *umat* could grow more self-aware and interconnected, but also that a more precise image of the houses of worship peppered around the region might help producing a clearer representation of Buddhism in Temanggung which, in turn, could herald visibility and the potential of directing funds and donations.

Nevertheless, the safari excursions retained above all a religious significance. Visits at various temples of the region coincided sometimes with formal service, occasionally overseen by a monk. The departure point of most conversations hinged invariably on Buddhism as the common ground between the young Buddhists and the local hosts. This could be expressed through references or inquiries on local histories or unknotting the web of personal acquaintances and kin connections. Moreover, in a few instances, some of the more religiously advanced young activists began to take on the role of officiants in temple service,[12] just like Sura had done in his village of provenance. This included ritual guidance (meditation and chanting) and often also a short lecture.

12 Like in many urban temples in Indonesia, in the absence of monks, formal service is usually conducted in villages by lay practitioners, addressed as *romo* (male) or *ramani* (female) who sometimes undergo specific training for the role. Buaban (2020) has observed how the increase in Theravādin monastic presence is progressively marginalising this informal institution within Indonesian Buddhism.

Although Buddhism was a centrepiece of the *Pemuda Buddhis* temple excursions, the religious element was not confined to formal Buddhist devotion. Links to the Javanese tradition, a conceptually hybrid realm in contemporary Java between the religious (*agama*) and the domain of customs (*adat*), were in several ways in the front of many of the activities and initiatives organised around *Pemuda Buddhis*. In July 2019, the activists succeeded in organising in the outskirts of Surjosari a sizeable music festival called 'Java Connections', filled with references and lectures on Javanese art, literature and spirituality, with academic guests that Subagyo managed to invite from the provinces' main cities.

The association between an idea of Javanese authenticity and Buddhism surfaced implicitly on the occasion of the music festival, inferred from the staging of the festival in the Buddhist-majority village. In other instances, the same association was made more explicit. In one of the safari I followed, to the hamlet of Purwodeso, the more or less intentional merging of Buddhism and Javanism came out in stark relief. On that afternoon, after the official worship by the temple, the monk and a *samanera*, who remained in the village specifically for the visit of the *Pemuda Buddhis* youngsters, guided the guests that managed to gather on that day to a small tour of the village. Not far from the *vihara* grounds, the monk stopped at a giant rock by a tree where an offering tray was placed. He lit a bunch of incense sticks and uttered a short mantra in Javanese, followed by a prolonged moment of silence. The monk later explained how the tree would grant blessings on whoever stopped by and asked for refuge.

After the two kinds of worship – by the temple and by the tree – the monk continued the short walk to a small hut that had the look of a Muslim prayer house (*mushola*). He invited the young activists to notice a wide opening in the inner wall of the hut, which faced a dark intricate tangle of trunks and roots which was nothing other than the beginning of the forest which stretched right behind the hut. The opening in the wall allowed one to sit in meditation right under the tree roots and the half-filled offering bowls with a few soaked petals in it suggested that the spot was still somewhat in use. The only salient description that the monk gave to the young participants was that the kind of Buddhism of Purwodeso was "an example of how Indonesian Buddhism had become one with Javanese culture".

Episodes such as Purwodeso's safari were not atypical in their convergence of Buddhist and Javanese religious features in the activities put up by the young Buddhists movement. The two traditions were merged in more explicit terms with another initiative, that is the revitalisation of the local *nyadran*, traditional Javanese cemetery feast dedicated to kinship or community ancestors (see Rizzo 2024). In 2019, the ritual was thoroughly refashioned by the activists into a multi-day event open to outsiders for a live-in option (for a fee) and

filled with excursions, guided meditations in the forest by ordained monks and temple visits. The event was successful enough to be replicated the next year.

Interspersed with notions and imaginaries of culture, the continuum in which the Javanese ritual tradition is positioned in post-colonial Java, the activities brought together by *Pemuda Buddhis* exceeded the strictly Buddhist sphere and spilled over from the domain of the religious. In the wider revivalist efforts shaped by activists such as Subagyo, Buddhism and Javanism were conceived as mutually related for the life of communities like Surjosari and the other villages of the highlands with a significant Buddhist demography. The willingness to rekindle a sense of religious sociality through the means of culture was also clear in the introduction of Javanese-style wear on major celebrations, the setting up of a gamelan music set in the basement of the temple, but also in the reproduction of Borobudur-inspired black *stupa*s and Buddha statues[13] that began to dot the yards of Surjosari during my stay.

The insistence on ethnocultural elements had also the implicit prospect of creating an 'attractive' community with respect to outsiders, an attractiveness which, capitalising on a renewed valorisation of cultural authenticity, could be mobilised for visibility and the initiation of a cultural-tourist economy. An image frequently evoked by activists and residents was that of *potensi wisata*, 'tourist potential', applied to a variety of situations, from the area's landscape and natural lushness to religious rituality. The sociocultural and religious revitalisation of villages like Surjosari was therefore contiguous with preoccupations of a more economic nature. From a trans-regional perspective, this echoed comparable moves that were unfolding at the same time in other contexts, such as the Maap Euang project in Thailand (Schertenleib 2022) in which agroeconomics and the building of a meditation centre open to outsiders are envisioned in unison to fuel social engagement and revitalization on a neighborhood level. Although with remarkably different undertones – not in the least, being a minority religious enterprise ensuing in a broader increasingly vocal Islamic backdrop – this aspect became unequivocal with a simultaneous agenda put forward by the *Pemuda Buddhis* activists, aimed at upgrading an entire entry into the local agricultural fabric, the production of coffee.

13 See Rizzo 2022 for a case study on the novel emergence of shrines in rural Java.

4.2 Ethnopreneurialism and Coffee-Driven Empowerments

Early in 2017, the activists of *Pemuda Buddhis* had explicitly pledged to dedicate more energy over that year to the economic empowerment of their religious community. Sensing that the wellbeing and survival of Temanggung Buddhism passed through its impression of vitality as a religion as much as through the economic relevance and strength of its community, the young activists had begun to collect ideas about the possible content and paths of that 'empowerment' (*pemberdayaan*). As I heard several times during their gatherings at Subagyo's place, many of the issues that affected the Buddhist communities of Temanggung could be traced to the fact that the countryside lifestyle and occupational perspectives, which meant predominantly farming, had become an undesirable option for most youngsters over the past decades. This seemed to imply that by reverting the set of symbolic and economic associations attributed to rural life, the negative demographic trends could be equally counteracted.

The narrative formulated on such meetings portrayed the economic and religious tendencies of Buddhist villages as being constantly weaved into one another. Discussions on these lines spanned all levels of formality, from veranda talk to regional conferences, all invariably juxtaposed economic action with the development and 'improvement' of religiosity. This seemed to be in part confirmed by the evidence provided by numbers. According to much statistical data, in fact, it so happened that the lower-income and less infrastructurally developed sub-districts in Temanggung were also those inhabited by the Buddhist communities.

Despite the mediatic noise around the 2011-12 protests, areas such as Surjosari appeared often at the margins of the regional developments about tobacco farming. According to Sura, this was largely due to the unorganised aspect of the tobacco chain in the area. Many farmers tended to sell their products on the informal market, autonomously and often at a rate even lower than the price set by unions in other districts. These practices tended to perpetuate patterns of relative poverty in areas such as Surjosari's, compared to other sections of the regency.

Rather than focussing on a traditional economic activity such as tobacco, an activity which, according to the Temanggung union, occupies in part or entirely the crops of nearly 90% of the farmers, *Pemuda Buddhis* activists shifted the attention for their vision of economic empowerment to other agricultural domains and practices: mushrooms farming, the implementation of permaculture principles and, especially, coffee. The coffee business in all its declinations – from farming techniques to the establishment of hip cafés – was a buzz topic in many conversations among the younger residents. The

association between coffee and the Temanggung highlands was also established through plenary discussions and more formal settings, such as conferences and meetings with Buddhist institutions.

The starting point in which an actual plan of economic activism was formulated once again under the aegis of a formal Buddhist platform, this time the setting of a meditation retreat. From an idea of Subagyo, over the New Year's Eve of 2017, *Pemuda Buddhis* organised a meditation retreat intended mostly for young people. The retreat was led by Venerable Jatarika, an East Javanese monk who received ordination in the Thai Thammayut lineage. Apart from being an occasion for the practice of *atthasilani*, the eight moral precepts, the retreat was intended to bring together on a more or less formal platform a number of activists from the province in order to discuss and sketch in the spare time a blueprint of what 'economic empowerment' could mean for Temanggung Buddhists. It underscored, too, how the community empowering ideas of the main *Pemuda Buddhis* activists braided in the organisational and financial capacity of some of the formal Buddhist institutions of the country.

A few ideas for locating areas of economic potentiality (*potensi pemberdayaan*) in Temanggung were derived from a workshop attended by Sura in central Jakarta. The workshop was organised by Institut Nagarjuna, an inter-denominational Buddhist NGO devoted to the support of a liberal and progressive understanding of the dhamma, called *dhamma kontekstual*. The institute collaborated also with local NGOs for the promotion of the dhamma and for improving the living conditions of the *umat*. For Sura, coffee and earwood mushroom cultivation were the particularly strategic areas that could be harnessed in Temanggung and that would generate the most benefit for the residents in the mid-long term. Coffee was an especially profitable domain that could also let Temanggung Buddhists participate in the generalised flare of enthusiasm and trendiness that seemed to shroud coffee production and consumption in Indonesia at that time.

Like in other regions in Indonesia, coffee farming was introduced in Temanggung during the Dutch administration in both its present varieties, arabica and robusta. However, the crop remained largely a marginal agricultural entry for the domestic market, as much of the country's coffee production was pulled by the export market. The development of a local 'coffee culture' in recent years had somewhat reversed this pattern. The expansion of coffee plantations in several regions of the archipelago could not keep up with the booming business to the extent that Indonesia experienced a sudden increase in coffee import too.[14] In Java, like for tobacco farming, the

14 BPS2019:https://www.bps.go.id/publication/2019/12/06/b5e163624c20870bb3d6443a/statistik-kopi-indonesia-2018.html.

regency of Temanggung far outnumbered any other district in terms of hectares and productivity.[15] This was an effect in part of the wide support of the rural development program of the province initiated in the 1990s, which maintained that the intercropping of coffee and tobacco could counteract the risk of land erosion to which much of the region is exposed (Febriharjati 2015).

While these general trends explained part of the positive prospects of coffee production in the Temanggung highlands, Sura insisted that the farming of coffee seeds in Temanggung could be considered a particularly beneficial enterprise in that very moment. Between 2014 and 2016 the DJKI (General Directorate for Intellectual Property) issued a new act that brought under its protection two new varieties of coffee, the Sindoro-Sumbing Java Arabica and Temanggung Robusta. The first variety referred to the localities stretched on the Temanggung-Wonosobo slopes while the second applied to Temaunggung at large. Provided that cultivation and harvest met a specified set of requirements, farmers in the given areas could obtain a certificate of Geographical Indication, with its relative benefits on the upscaling market.

Two months after the resolutions that *Pemuda Buddhis* activists formulated over the meditation retreat, it was on coffee that much of the efforts of the group began to be concentrated. Through a chain of personal contacts, the activist group eventually reached out to a Buddhayāna organisation from Surabaya, who accepted to make a generous donation for the implementation of the agricultural program of *Pemuda Buddhis*. They decided to meet formally in February that year at a training centre near Semarang, the regional capital of Central Java. The administrator from the Buddhayāna group made it clear enough that the system of certificates of geographical indication needed to be harnessed in specific ways. In fact, one of the bases of the organisation's financial support was not only the acquisition of land but also the education of the local actors in marketing strategies.

According to Sura's accounts, coffee was a subject of conversation in connection to the affairs of the regional Buddhist *umat* even before the exploratory meetings with Buddhayāna and Institut Nagarjuna. Coffee farming was already associated with the *potensi pemberdayaan* of the area, when a report on the situation of coffee farmers in Temanggung was presented at a cultural festival in Borobudur. While the region could boast some of the best varieties of coffee worldwide, the quantity and quality of the final product placed on the

15 BPS 2019: https://jateng.bps.go.id/statictable/2019/10/16/1768/produksi-tanaman-perkebunan-menurut-kabupaten-kota-dan-jenis-tanaman-di-provinsi-jawa-tengah-ton-2018.html.

market was highly uneven across the sub-districts. Buddhist-inhabited areas especially were deemed below the general standards. In order to meet immediate economic necessities, many farmers would sell the seed, to either the final buyer or to middlemen, when it was still on the tree. This meant little control and care given to the timings of the harvest, with the seed oftentimes collected unripe. For Sura, the result was a final product of low quality that had a market value much below its potential.

After taking into consideration all these factors and opinions, *Pemuda Buddhis* activists, in accordance with the Buddhayāna group, contracted a coffee plantation to be treated 'professionally'. The expertise needed for making the entire system more competitive would be guaranteed by inviting coffee farming and permaculture specialists. "I don't think we would get any far if we only gave abstract lectures to the farmers", said Sura, by far the most engaged activist on the matter, "Instead, we decided to pay some experts to move in here for a while and 'spin the wheel' (*menggerakkan roda*), so that the farmers could learn from a concrete example. I feel this is the most effective way".

The Buddhist, 'professional', coffee plantation was acquired at a rate of 10 million Rupiah (€ 647), and about 700 trees were being farmed by the end of 2017. Few months later, Subagyo acquired a state-of-the-art coffee roaster, which he shared profusely on social media. He also included the short cut of a coffee roasting scene in a promotional video of Surjosari submitted for a regional competition for the allocation of funds for village infrastructural upgrades.

Finally, the coffee project was expanded with the opening of a coffee shop serving both as café and roastery, in a hamlet just downhill from the Surjosari slope. The business was expected to turn remunerative once robusta GI certificates would be acquired but that could also serve, meanwhile, as a trendy and leafy gathering venue. The café became a reality in the middle of the 2020 Covid pandemic, promoting itself as 'the café in the middle of the forest' and showcasing a decorative style between Javanese and 'tiki' aesthetics.

5 Conclusions: The Motions of a Movement

The emergence of *Pemuda Buddhis* in the Temanggung highlands signals the formation of a Buddhist movement that condenses a set of historical, religious and economic stances in complex ways. Conceived as an intersectional organisation crossing religious affiliation and age (albeit 'youth' remained very generously defined), the association became the expression of a cultural-religious revivalist stance, formulated against the backdrop of a perceived sense of precarity. The feeling of marginalisation and of demographic contraction echoes the idea of 'relative deprivation', one of the features which early

writers on social movements such as Ralph Nicholas (1973) identified as the starting point for the articulation of any movement. Some of the more or less elicited motives in the projects of *Pemuda Buddhis* and in the perspectives of activists like Subagyo and Sura may appear to resonate with this model. However, rather than a form of deprivation understood in terms of political or economic subalternity – although, as we have seen, a feeling of economic marginality does feature in the area – much of the sense of 'lack' seemed to be located in the realm of visibility, (self)representation and both organised and unorganised forms of sociality. The formation of an organisation like *Pemuda Buddhis* is to be understood also in this frame.

The set of initiatives both religious and secular established by the group highlights furthermore the means through which a form of resistance is articulated. By mobilising fragments of ethnocultural history and narratives of religious 'return', the activists construct a specific kind of cultural memory. Importantly, the type of narrative pieced together is not antagonist to the official nationalist or hegemonic discourse, as it is frequently the case among culturally-conscious movements (Doerr 2014). In Java, the attention to history, including pre-Islamic religious history, is in itself a derivate of a century-long process of nation-building and the evocation of Hindu-Buddhist symbols and heritage sites constitutes a centrepiece of these discourses.

In this sense, the *Pemuda Buddhis* movement occupies an unsettled territory between dynamics of conservativeness and innovation, agency and structure. The conservative aspect of the movement is evident in its resistance to the broader trends in the Javanese religious landscape, trends that often converge islamising and secularising motions (Safa'at 2019), but also in its loyalty to a specific vision of what an authentic Javanese cultural history might be. Nevertheless, the practices, imaginaries and religious infrastructures mobilised by the activists rest on thoroughly innovative patterns. These include the revalorisation of rural lifestyle in positive and celebratory vocabularies, a pattern which radiates from urban-generated imaginaries and which heralds also optimistic economic prospects, in agroeconomic and eco-tourist keys. As the cases of Subagyo and Sura showed, this aspect is embodied in counter-dynamics of de-urbanisation that complexify the unidirectional template of sub-urbanisation in which Asian patterns of mobility are frequently described.

In religious terms, *Pemuda Buddhis* also functions as the carrier through which religious change diffuses in the area. Although vested as tradition, the revitalisation of waning or near-extinct Javanist religious practices is a visible outcome of the innovative efforts introduced with the establishment of the organisation. Less explicit perhaps is the innovative force issued with the tight links between the organisation and national Buddhist institutions, particularly with the expanding scope of Theravāda Buddhism in the country.

In remote regions such as Temanggung, the attempts at strengthening Buddhist socialisation on a hamlet level through the activities of the youth group signified in many cases also the diffusion of Theravādin forms of linguistic and ritual practice, from the ubiquity of Pāli vocabulary (including in informal greetings) to mindfulness-based meditation techniques. These significant variations in temple conduct were often transmitted through the activists' very ritual guidance in temple service and resulted, in turn, from the embeddedness of some of them with the tight Theravāda organisational infrastructure emanating from the island's main cities. The inauguration of the group itself, moreover, as well as the group's temple excursions and the meeting revolving around economic empowerment, were all sanctioned, supported or at least overseen by Buddhist institutions and foundations and invariably attended by ordained Theravādin monks.

The establishment of *Pemuda Buddhis* emphasised not only the extent to which the margins of a movement may blur into cognate organisational dynamics (i.e. the expansion of Theravādin associationism), but also and especially how the attempts at breathing new life in a religious community are in continuity with economic, demographic and ethnohistorical concerns, obfuscating in doing so the edges of the 'religion' slot. The labour toward the implementation of a modern coffee entrepreneurialism on a religious platform in the Surjosari highlands portrays this aspect clearly.

The religious and non-religious dynamics that pivoted around Surjosari through the activism of *Pemuda Buddhis* were made possible by the intense traffic of funds, images and people. As the biographies of some of the activists suggest, religious and social-economic change might be as well driven by processes of mobility which extend beyond the well-known trails of urbanisation. In a context thematised by the simultaneous discursive revalorisation of rural life and the practical opportunities provided by the trending industries of coffee and eco-tourism, villages or 'remote areas' may come out not as marginal quarters in the pulls and draws of capitalism but as generative cultural ecologies instantiating unprecedented hubs of meanings and practice.

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